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HEADLINE: Netscape Navigator

BODY:

Almost everyone chooses Netscape Navigator as their primary Web browser, and almost everyone makes the right choice. Netscape's \$ 49.95 software (free for academic users) remains the easiest-to-use browser, with the least obtrusive interface. It's also an easy-to-manage news reader and mail client, and its plug-in technology lets it act as the well-behaved host to dozens of specialized applications that appear automatically within Navigator's main window as soon as they're needed. Navigator is fast, customizable, and generally reliable, although its shipping versions and public prereleases have a history of crashing. Virtually every utility and add-on designed to work with a Web browser works best with Navigator, and it leads the pack in its support for Java applets. The \$ 79.95 Navigator Gold version (also free for academic use) includes a simple and intuitive Web-page editor. Despite Microsoft's attempts to surpass it in speed and features, when you venture into the Web, Navigator remains your swiftest and surest guide. We tested a late prerelease version of Navigator 3.0, which looks almost identical to Version 2.0. The interface comprises two toolbars, an address bar, and status bar--you can hide any or all of them--and a main window that divides into frames if a Web page tells it to do so. The main toolbar includes buttons for moving backward and forward through sites you've already visited and for standard functions like printing and reloading pages; it can display as icons, text, or both. Below this, the address bar includes an icon that, when you drag it to another application or the desktop, creates an Internet Shortcut that will take you back to the page.

Netscape pioneered frames, variable font sizes, and other graphic enhancements that make Web sites colorful and intriguing while slowing down data transfer. A menu option lets you tell Navigator not to transfer any graphics from remote sites (although you can't stop frames from appearing), and a toolbar button or shortcut key lets you load graphics for any page where you decide you want them. Navigator's keyboard, despite helpful shortcut keys, lags behind Internet Explorer, which lets you navigate between links without touching the mouse.

You can enhance security by turning off Java and JavaScript, and the program optionally warns you before submitting insecure form data or using the "cookie" protocol that lets a site record information about your visit. Dialog boxes let you specify "helper" applications for displaying specific file types or for telnet and similar functions. Unlike Internet Explorer, Navigator can default to using a fast file viewer to open files on the Web, while Windows itself opens similar files with a slower word processor or bitmap editor.



Navigator's bookmarks feature uses an HTML file to store site addresses and descriptions, in contrast to Internet Explorer, which uses Windows shortcuts. Netscape's method makes it harder to remove bookmarks but is otherwise easier to manage, and, unlike Microsoft's, can't be broken when some other application modifies the Windows Registry.

The major new feature in Navigator 3.0 is its add-on pack with Talk and VRML applets. A few advanced features in Internet Explorer 3.0 won't be supported until Navigator 4.0 arrives later this year. Meanwhile, Navigator's transparency, speed, and attention to detail make it the one Internet program you can't be without.

Netscape Navigator 3.0. List price: \$ 49. (Free for academic use.) Netscape Communications Corp., Mountain View, CA; 415-937-3777; home.netscape.com.

Netscape Navigator makes it just as easy to print Web pages as to view them. A Print Preview option displays on-screen exactly what you'll get on the page.

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